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Voluntary Recall of Infant Formulas for Low Iodine Content

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Report Highlights:

The Center of Food Safety (CFS) has advised parents to stop feeding six powdered infant formulas belonging to three Japanese brands to their babies because test results confirmed low iodine content. If used as suggested on their labels, the iodine intake of infants will be less than one third of the value recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), i.e. 15 microgram per kilogram of body weight. The importers have initiated a voluntary recall of the products. The incident has prompted the government to speed up legislative control of infant formulas.

Background

Hong Kong does not have a piece of regulation governing infant formula. Further, the nutrition labeling regulation which became effective in 2010 does not cover infant formula. There have been calls from the public urging for strengthened regulation over infant formula. In response to the pressure, the Hong Kong Center for Food Safety (CFS) has undertaken a two-year targeted surveillance program this May to test the nutritional composition of infant and follow-up formula available in the market so as to evaluate the possibility of setting up legislative control of infant formula. The CFS took samples at local outlets for testing of their energy and 33 essential nutrients defined by Codex.

Out of the first two batches of 35 samples analyzed, six Japanese infant formula samples belonging to three Japanese brands were detected with low iodine content. Test results are available at the government website ([batch 1](#) and [batch 2](#)). According to the instructions provided on the packaging label on the products, the iodine intake of infants relying on the products as the sole source of nutrition would be less than one third of the value recommended by the WHO, i.e. 15 microgram per kg of body weight. As Iodine is an essential micronutrient required for normal body function, growth and development, its insufficient intake will affect the functioning of the thyroid gland and may harm brain development of infants. As such, the CFS announced the test results on August 8 and 10 for the first and second batch respectively and advised the public to stop feeding their babies with the formulas in question. The trade voluntarily recalled the products on the shelf accordingly.

Apart from the six products subject to voluntary recall, six other products were also found with iodine content lower than Codex standard but importers have not been advised to remove them from shelves because they meet WHO standards.

As of August 10, the CFS has completed testing on the iodine content of the Japanese infant formulas available in Hong Kong. Tests of iodine content on other infant formulas produced in other countries will be completed by the end of August. The CFS will also continue its tests on the content of energy and the remaining 32 essential nutrients set by Codex in infant and follow-up formulas of different brands. This targeted surveillance program is expected to be completed by mid- 2013. Test results will be announced in phases.

Impact

The finding that iodine deficiency in some infant formulas serves as a catalyst prompting the Hong Kong government to initiate legislative work regulating the nutrition requirements and labeling of infant formula.

Currently, Hong Kong does not have a specific piece of regulation for infant formula. The CFS takes milk powder samples for chemical, microbiological and radiological tests under the food surveillance program. The nutrition labeling regulation which became effective in 2010 does not cover infant formula. In light of the finding of iodine deficiency in some formula, the CFS has pledged to formulate, as soon as possible, regulatory proposals regarding the nutritional composition and nutrition labeling of infant formula. Before the legislation is in place, the CFS will issue a code of practice to promote breast feeding and to provide guidelines for nutrition requirements and the labeling of infant formula. However, a timeframe has yet to be provided.

The government's survey exercise on nutrition content of infant formula indicated the lack of accuracy on labels. The [test results](#) on iodine content on quite a number of products are different from the labels. The discrepancy could vary between 20 to 45 percent. Pharmacists commented that a 5 percent discrepancy between test result and label already suggests that the product lacks consistence in product quality control. The public urged the government to look into the issue.

There are over 100 brands of infant formulas in Hong Kong. Some Industry representatives estimated that Japanese infant formulas had once been very popular in Hong Kong accounting for over one-third of the market share. However, the market share of Japanese infant formulas greatly shrieked to 3 percent after the potential food safety issues concerning the nuclear event in Japan last year.

According to the estimates of the Hong Kong government, about 1000 plus infants are being fed with the formulas in question. As a safety precaution, the HKG arranged designated clinics to provide thyroid function test for infants between one and eight months old who are taking those formulas. As of August 12, the test results of 98 blood samples were available, of which 97 were normal. One test result revealed that the thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) level was slightly below the reference range but not as a result of iodine deficiency. The test results, to a certain extent, alleviated the worries of many parents.

Reportedly, Japan has no legal requirements for iodine content in formula milk.